

On Vocal Performance

by Mathurin Kerbusso

The Introduction

As with any art, and certainly any performing art, there is no "right" way to vocal performance. This course is, therefore, not so much a "how-to" course as an overview of suggestions. Some of these come from my own experience, most come from the generous comments and critiques of others. Any errors in the transmission of these suggestions is totally mine.

Also, any artistic endeavor cannot be easily broken up into categories. Although this handout is organized under specific headings, realize that significant overlap exists. In fact, the art of vocal performance is a *gestalt*, and the various parts cannot be taken piecemeal in a real situation but flow into each other to create a (hopefully!) pleasing whole.

The Instrument

The Environmental Factor

This is basically where you are performing. As amateur performers, and performers in the SCA in particular, we rarely have the luxury of an acoustically perfect environment. You may find yourself performing in a small room where you can speak or sing normally and be heard by everyone. Or you may find yourself in an outdoor setting where soft "walls" and soft bodies suck up your voice. You may end up in a large barn-like building where the echoes threaten to drown you out.

There is very little you can do about the environment in which you perform except to be aware of the limitations. If possible, try to practice in the area where you will be performing. This will give you an idea of what you can and cannot do in that space. Then you can gear your material and your presentation to the space.

The Human Factor

This is basically you, at least from the diaphragm to the lips. What nature gave you may not be as great as what you would like it to be, but you can do a lot more to maximize your voice than your environment. The most important thing is to take care of your voice.

Generally, what is good for your overall health is good for your voice. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, quit. If you can't quit, at least refrain for as long as you can before you perform--hours, days, whatever. Good aerobic exercise will build up your stamina and lung capacity. Taking care of your general health will help prevent that nasty cold or sore throat that ruins your performance.

Keep your voice lubricated. The best liquid for this is water--with no ice! After that comes tea, lemonade and other soft drinks, but remember that these all have some astringent effects and will alter your voice to one

degree or another. Avoid alcohol before a performance. It doesn't make you sound better, it just makes you think you sound better! Alcohol is very astringent and can alter your voice dramatically. If you must drink alcohol before performing (for your personal sanity) stick to beer or wine. Under no circumstances drink spirits.

Don't strain your voice. Don't volunteer to herald the list table the day you are going to perform. Restrain your enthusiasm when the new Prince delivers that last blow and wins Crown Tourney. Once strained, it takes days for your voice to return to normal. You won't impress anyone at least if you are croaking like a frog because you screamed like a banshee.

The Audience

An SCA Audience Is Not a Medieval Audience

An SCA audience has grown up in a Modern world, with tastes that have been conditioned by TV, radio and movies. This strongly affects what they will enjoy--and what they will find tedious.

No SCA audience will sit through a recitation of an entire Icelandic Saga. Their musical tastes have been conditioned to popular songs which run approximately 1.5 to 3 minutes. Prose recitations should not exceed 10 minutes, ideally less (about the time between commercials on TV!)

Very few of us are scholars of arcane languages or dialects. Don't overdo the use of unfamiliar words, usages, languages or dialects.

An SCA Audience Is Not a Modern Audience

An SCA audience expects a certain look, feel and sound. It is that elusive thing we call "Period." It is very hard to describe, but we know what it is when we hear it. If your performance comes out sounding too modern you will lose your audience just as quickly as by making it difficult to understand.

Sprinkle (don't drown!) the piece with period words and phrasing. Try to imitate a style that was done in period. If you are filking, try to use folk-song type base material. If you are writing your own tunes, keep them fairly uncomplex, repetitive, but not boring. "Keep It Simple, Stupid!"--but not so simple that it is stupid!

The Material

Length

Songs should not be longer than 5 minutes, stories not more than 15 minutes, 3 minutes and 10 minutes respectively is even better.

Language

Keep ancient words and phrases to a minimum, but not so as to make the piece sound totally "modern". Use accents, dialects and other languages with caution, though they can be very effectively used correctly.

Accuracy

Know your material. If your work is about an historical event or taken from period literature, odds are that someone in the audience will be familiar with it. If your piece is about SCA events ("No sh*t, there I was...") then the chances are very good that someone in your audience was there!

Know where your material comes from. Understand the emotional, historical and literary background. You will be better able to get the feeling of the work over to your audience if you know what it is yourself.

The Magic

A performer should be able to do more than sing or recite. A good performance transports the audience to another place and time, perhaps one that only exists in the imagination. When a performer succeeds in doing that, the only word for it is Magic! Following are some suggestions for getting, and keeping, the magic.

Accompaniment

Although the primary instrument for a vocal performance is your voice, accompaniment can add a great deal to your performance. The right instrument not only gives a more period feel to your performance, it can actually improve it, by reinforcing the strengths and detracting from the weaknesses in your voice. A harp or guitar can cover the occasional false note, a bodhran or dumbek can help you keep your timing. Experiment with instruments, perhaps getting a friend to be your regular accompanist.

Appearance

You should make every effort to have your appearance be as authentic as possible. A plain T-tunic and sweat pants may be all right for your first few events, but it makes it difficult for your audience to take you seriously. It jars them out of the magical mood that you want them in.

If costume is not your strong point, get a costumer to help you research and construct a convincing outfit. Don't neglect accessories either; our ancestors were very fond of trim, fur and jewelry, the gaudier the better!

Animation

Don't stand there with your hands at your sides, with a dead-pan, monotone delivery! Put the emotion of the piece in your face, your hands, your body! Make eye contact with your audience! Humans communicate best when all the senses are involved, so remember to move around and use appropriate gestures and facial expressions.

Modulate your voice; laugh the words of a Viking boasting at a feast, sigh when describing a lost love, cry the death of a great king.

Practice in front of a mirror. Use a tape recorder to hear what you sound like to others.

Accents

Done properly, an accent can lend the finishing touch to the whole product of your performance. If you can do a creditable brogue, use it. Don't overdo it, and don't do it if you are no good at it. Test it out on a familiar

but honest audience.

The Summary

All of these suggestions are just that--suggestions. No one can tell another how to perform. Each performer finds their own style and techniques. Practice often, perform as much as you can. The improvement you will make will amaze you.

The most helpful thing you can have as a performer is a friendly but honest critic, someone who will tell you when you stink and when you excel. If you do not have someone like that among your personal acquaintances, try to corner a member of the Bardic College or someone else you know to be a regular performer. What they tell you is no more written in stone than this course, but any honest criticism will help you to zero in on those areas you need to improve on.

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